

First Truth About the Homeless: Nobody Cares

By DOUGLAS MACKINNON

"He was somebody's baby." That was my thought as I was walking to work and noticed a 40-something man digging through the trash can in front of my building. How do you go from being someone's child to digging through trash cans and begging on the streets for survival?

If we are going to be truly honest when discussing the homeless, then we have to first admit that virtually nobody really cares about them. Nobody.

Oh sure, at certain times, politicians will pretend to care if it will play on the heartstrings of undecided voters. Some newspapers will run a story, either to demonstrate to their readers that they are good citizens or because there might be a Pulitzer Prize down the road.

Then, of course, what about us? The "un-homeless." What is our reaction to those we see begging and living on the street? For the most part, we shun them, we run from them and we avoid eye contact at all costs. Every once in a while, we drop a quarter or a dollar bill into their cups and hope God notices the gesture.

There is nothing wrong with any of those reactions. It's human nature to fear or run from what we don't understand.

As the child of two alcoholic parents, I found myself homeless a number of times. My entire childhood was spent living well below the poverty line, and yet, as an adult, I exhibit many of the reactions mentioned above.

For the most part, people just don't understand the homeless,

how they got there or how to help them. As the old joke goes, "A recession is when your neighbor loses his job. A depression is when you lose yours."

There are a lot of "depressed" homeless people out there, yet the very tragedy of their existence does not enlighten even them with the solution to their misery. Why? Because there are no easy answers.

If we are going to be honest about the homeless, then we also have to admit that many are beyond any real help or hope. A large number of the homeless suffer from drug addiction and/or alcoholism, are mentally challenged or have decided to escape from the bounds of "normal" society.

Leaving that number aside, however, our nation does have an obligation to help the rest. It is criminally obscene for us to let one child go hungry for even one night in our country. Surely in an era when we have multiple bidders for million-dollar homes, we can figure out how to feed a malnourished child.

To do so, however, the political games must stop. The poor and the homeless are continually used as disposable pawns to be sacrificed in the defense of partisan rhetoric by those who hope to capitalize on their anguish. Who is guilty of such abuse? Republicans, Democrats, liberals, conservatives and the media.

Leaving such vile partisan tactics aside, the fact is the Bush administration is spending billions of dollars to fund housing and service programs around the country for the homeless and poverty-stricken. The fact is there still are too many Republicans who see the homeless as a

problem for the Democrats. The fact is corporate America could do much more than it is doing now. The fact is the media could shine a much brighter spotlight on the issue.

We all could do more, but before that can happen, we have to accept that we can only save those who can and want to be saved. Period. The dilemma becomes: What kind of resources can we marshal? Who, aside from the children, are truly savable? And when can we have an honest debate on the issue?

The homeless are not some subhuman background noise to be ignored on our way to an appointment, but people who, for whatever reason, have been relegated to the lowest rung in society.

Life has taken their hopes, their dreams and family, but basic human dignity is a right that should never be stripped away — because they once were somebody's baby.

Douglas MacKinnon was press secretary to former Sen. Bob Dole. Now an author, he was also a White House and Pentagon official.